

Party Ties that Bind by LexiCastelS

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Summary: Essentially an exploration of the friendship of Max and El through various scenarios which are set post S2. Begins a few weeks after the gate closing and continues well into adulthood. Mileven and Lumax heavy.

1. First Blood

First Blood

"Lucas, that's the stupidest thing to come out of your mouth in years!"

"It's not stupid Dill weed, they need our help and this is the best way, back me up Will!"

"Nah man leave me out of this one, she may be my sister but I don't know that she would let me survive if we go through with it."

Outside the AV room door Mike Wheeler stood listening to his three best friends shouting at each other. He knew he should intervene before Lucas stormed out and missed yet another meeting this week but Mike really did not want to mediate this argument again. He could hear the exhaustion in Lucas' voice when he said "Guys its destroying her and I really don't know if I can handle anymore of it"

Mike sighed and opened the door. All eyes turned to him and he could see that Lucas was desperate, there were numerous pages with plans written in his boxy scrawl littered on the table and Will and Dustin looked exasperated.

"Mike, thank god man, tell Lucas that we can not put ourselves between the girls. Its a suicide mission." Said Dustin as Will nodded in agreement.

Lucas didn't say anything, he just looked at the party's paladin with pleading eyes and Mike could see that the guy was one failed argument away from just going rogue. That course of action would definitely not end well so Mike did what he had to do.

"Lucas is right guys-"He watches as Wills shoulders slump and Dustin rests his elbows on the AV table and places his face in his hands. "The party has been at war for too long and its bull, the girls are not going to just get over this like we hoped." Lucas looked like he was having a hard time deciding if he should hug Mike, sit down or run out of the room. Mike moved closer to the table and peered at the plans laid on it.

Dustin spoke up, his voice still muffled by his hands "I'd like it to be noted that I hate this and I kind of hate you both right now."

"Seconded" said Will. Mike and Lucas shared a half smile

"Noted." Says Mike still shuffling through the pile of half baked ideas to get Max and El to begin speaking to each other.

Dustin finally lifted his head, "It's no use man, those plans all suck- you know its true Lucas" he said as the other boy opened his mouth to argue, "and if we are going to do this we need to do it right, El has the force and Max has rage, locking them in a room together will not cut it."

The three remaining boys let their silence signify their agreement. Dustin looked each of his friends in the eyes allowing them to think about just how screwed they would all be if they went in with some crappy plan that would crumble in front of them.

"Guys, I think we need to call Steve." Says Will noting the solemn nods of his friends upon hearing his request.

"Max and El do listen to him, basically without question." Added Dustin.

"Yeah.. yeah, okay, lets get Steve to meet us at the cabin tomorrow after school, I'll tell El the we are going to hang out there together, Lucas you figure out some way to get Max to agree. Dustin you bring Steve. Will, you cover us with the adults and meet us there by 4." Every one gave mock salutes and they began to work on their AV club activities, which really consisted to trying to boost the wave lengths of their walkie talkies.

The next day flew by and Dustin had managed to get Steve to agree to meet them at Hopper and El's old hiding place. Dustin, Will and Steve were waiting anxiously inside the house. They knew this could end terribly for everyone but Steve was determined to help the girls get over their differences and be friends, heaven knows they could each do with a female friend. They could hear Mike talking to El and entering through the back door. Seconds later they heard Lucas and Max walking though the front door. It seemed as if all the air had

been sucked out of the room everyone looked around with the girls shooting daggers at each other and the guys all looking toward Steve with pleading eyes. The elder boy cleared his throat and put his arms out, "Aren't my two favorite girls going to give me a hug?"

Max continued glaring at Eleven but El was a sucker for hugs and she liked Steve so she stepped forward. Max followed not wanting El to get all the affection. As he hugged both girls tightly the rest of the boys split up and guarded the two entrances. Steve let go and ushered both girls towards the couch, they sat stiffly on opposite ends aware that something was wrong but neither wanting to be the first to speak.

"So ladies," said Steve warily "I've been called in because it seems that the dipshit brigade is struggling, what with you two not getting along. They didn't want to be the ones to get in the middle so here I am getting in the literal middle" he finished glancing at both girls.

"It's not my fault, Steve, Eleven is the one with a stick up her ass! She won't even tell me why she hates me so much!" Argued Max

"Mouthbreather!" Hissed El

"God, get over that ! I just want to know what I ever did to you!" She said turning to face Eleven, hands turning to fists in her lap.

"Mike? Home." Called the brunette looking past Steve and ignoring Max altogether.

Will grabbed Mikes arm to keep him in place and Mike just shook his head in Els direction, he couldn't look at her or he would call the whole thing off and take her straight home. Steve held his hand up.

"Mike will take you home as soon as you tell us what is wrong here." Said Steve in what he hoped was a soothing voice. El gave Steve a hard look and she took note of how he seemed a bit scared of her nonetheless he did not back down.

"She's too normal. She can take things from me." Came a very quite response that the males in the room almost missed entirely, the redhead on the couch however, did not.

"Too normal? Take things? What the hell? Maybe by your fucked up sense of normalcy sure but by societal norms? Not even close!" Max was floored but angry unable to stop herself from yelling even when she noticed that the lights in the cabin were pulsing.

El did not look at the girl but mumbled something about taking the boys. Everyone began to understand. El was afraid that the guys would prefer Max because she had less baggage. For the time being they chose to ignore the waves of pure power rolling off of the angry/sad/embarrassed girl

"You're supposed to be smart El. I can not -nor do I want to- take them from you. I just want to join you all." Max scooted closer to the girl who stiffened but looked at the red head.

"Why?" Asked El

"Because..." The other girl paused thought it was only fair to air her own insecurities. "Because I hate my life when these guys aren't around. *I don't want you to take them from me.*" Eleven still looked embarrassed so Max went on, attempting to ignore everyone else in the room. "My brother is abusive and my parents are off the deep-end. They never really care what I do. These guys are my friends and if I want them I get you. Wheeler, Byers and you are a package deal but loneliness aside, I think you're pretty cool... when you aren't being a bitch."

Max had scooted right next to the brunette and all the boys were holding their breath without realizing it. It took Eleven a long time to respond, she just stared intently at Max's face. She sighed and held out her hand.

"Shake? I drew first blood." Max looked confused but she could tell the younger boys were happy so she shook assuming it was a step in the right direction at least. El smiled at her and Max understood why Mike was so besotted, that damn smile could move mountains. Max grinned back and on an impulse pulled Eleven into a hug. It was short but El had been unnerved enough that she accidentally turned the lights off.

"...oops, sorry" came her soft abashed voice. Everyone was laughing

good-naturedly as she flicked them back on.

"Well, Dustin, I guess my plan of locking them in a room together wasn't so stupid after all."

"Nah still dumb, we needed Steve and the rest of us to keep guard."

"Same premise." The two boys continued bickering but Max had tuned them out. She watched as Will and Mike came forward and hovered near by, talking to El. Steve was watching them all amusedly but Max was looking at El, a new friendship was possible now, and if it worked Max knew she would never want for a family or affection again. Max vowed silently to never allow the friendship to fail. She would not draw first blood.

2. Bonding Time

Bonding Time

Max had never had a sleepover before. She had never had anyone she wanted in her home nor did anyone want her in theirs. So the fact that she was on her way to her first ever sleepover with a real friend (and a female friend at that!) was just the slightest bit exhilarating.

Max had spent the majority of her childhood alone. She was aware of how to make friends but she just never found anyone interesting enough to make the effort for. As she got older, her window of opportunity shrank as bonds solidified amongst her peers and she was ultimately labeled an outcast. It didn't bother her too much. Skating was a solo sport and she didn't need friends to do that.

When her parents split up she had a moment where she desperately wished she had some one to talk to but as soon as the feeling came it was stifled by the young girl throwing herself into video games and more skateboarding. Even when Billy started to take his frustrations out on her she did not want for anyone to share her pain. She simply kept her head down, an angry grimace on her face, and a skate board underfoot. She was fine alone. Totally fine.

Moving to Hawkins sort of threw her for a loop. In California, everyone in her grade had written her off as a loner. It had been literal years since anyone had tried to befriend her yet her first day of school in Indiana had lead to a small group of boys following her around incessantly. It was creepy and unnerving. Max had enough to deal with at home, she didn't need stalkers, so she put on her airs and tried her damndest to make them leave her be. It failed of course. Dustin and Lucas had quickly wormed their way into her heart even if she refused to admit it for a very long time. Will came later, he was never mean but Max could tell the kid was going through some shit so she didn't bother him too much. Eventually there came Mike but he was a hard code to crack. It took several near death experiences in one night for him to even start being nice to her.

And then of course there was Eleven.

Eleven, who was this all powerful goddess in Max's eyes. She was pretty, lithe, sweet, funny, rebellious and feared almost as much as she was loved. Max could have been jealous, perhaps it would have been more normal if she had been but El was damaged and for all her attributes she was still a child who had obviously been neglected and abused. Max knew that that was like, and for the first time in her life Max wanted to have a friend. And she wanted Eleven to be that friend, the one she could talk to about the dark stuff when it got too tiring to hide it. Max worked hard for months to try and get El to like her. Hell, she would have been fine just getting El to say something civil to her.

It became a mild obsession. One which she spent countless hours harassing her boyfriend over. Lucas kept telling her to wait and it would work itself out but Max couldn't wait. She had waited years for a group of friends to call her own and she couldn't even enjoy it because Eleven wouldn't even stay in the room with her for more than a few minutes before she would ask Mike to take her somewhere else. Lucas had apparently grown weary of his girlfriends constant mood swings in relation to El, so he and the guys (with Steves help) forced a conversation between the girls. Max had kissed Lucas senseless that night as a thanks.

Now, Max had to solidify her friendship with the telekinetic brunette, and since there were currently no interdimensional monsters to fight she did the next best thing. She convinced Hopper and Joyce to let her have a sleep over. So there she was. Sitting at the desk in El's bedroom staring awkwardly at her new friend.

"What did you want to do?" Asked El, finally deciding that 20 minuets of heavy silence was enough.

"uhm... I actually didn't thing of anything..." replied Max a little embarrassed

El nodded and thought for a minute. "Joyce said sleep over have games and Will said the boys always watch movies. Do you want to watch a movie?"

"mmm. Do you think maybe we can play games first?" Asked Max. The other girl did not respond but walked to her dresser and pulled

off a sheet of paper. It was a list of 'fun sleepover games'.

"Nancy and Joyce made this for me. Do you want to pick one? Joyce said you're the guest so you should choose. I circled the ones that sounded fun though." El shoved the note toward Max and was describing the numerous games when she realized that Max was giggling. El frowned. "What?"

Max wiped her eyes "No El, nothing, its just— its funny how we we have spent so much time together with the boys and yet we cant stop being awkward. Its also cute how they made us a list." She smiled a toothy grin at El who smiled back

Max took the list and read it over. "How about we combine truth or dare with two-truths-and-a-lie?"

El seemed intrigued "How?" She said as she plopped back down on her bed pulling a teddy bear onto her lap.

"We each tell the other person two truths and a lie. If we correctly pick out the lie then nothing happens if we can't figure out the lie the that person has to do a dare." She explained. El carefully considered it before agreeing. Both girls were excited to learn more about each other. Max walked over to the bed and sat across from El.

" I'll go first, uhmm... okay. One: I've never had a sleep over before. Two: I've got a birthmark shaped like a star. And three: I am afraid of the ocean." El avoided a dare by choosing number three.

"My turn. One: I kissed Mike. Two: I was in a gang. And three: I hate coffee" Max looked thoughtful for a second before choosing number two.

" Nope. I love coffee."

"What?! You were in a gang?" Inquired Max in amazement, she then promptly lowered her voice " was it part of the lab Stuff?"

El bit her lower lip then nodded as if she had made up her mind. " I have a sister. I visited her and joined her gang." Max was bewildered so El shared the story of her very short life of crime, her mother, the return, all of it. When she was done Max was looking at her solemnly.

"I've... never told anyone that story. Hopper and Joyce know about Mama but not about Kali. Its a secret. Mike cant know yet either."

Max nodded " Yeah, I can see why you would want to keep that secret for now, but why tell me and not Mike?"

El shrugged "Nancy said sometimes girls who are friends tell each other things they don't tell anyone else. You are my friend who is a girl." Max was touched, she knew El didn't understand social conventions but she had trusted Max with her secret nonetheless, because Max was her friend.

The red head was broken from her thoughts as El reminded her about the dare she had yet to complete. El was merciful, or at least unsure of how the game worked because after laughing for three minutes as Max tried to open a can of soda with socks on her hands they went back to their game. The rest of the night was spent sharing secrets about their dysfunctional families, the boys, relationships and their upbringing. A few silly dares were thrown in for good measure to keep the mood light and by the time they went to bed they both felt lighter. They had each other to share their emotional burdens. Someone that they weren't dating or related to and trying to keep happy. It was a different sort of bond and the girls reveled in it.

Max knew that it was just the beginning and that in the future they may be tested but for now, as she laid on the sleeping bag next to El's bed she couldn't help the warmth that she felt. She had a friend. The friend that she had always wanted but never could admit. Max and El. The older girl fell asleep thinking that she liked the sound of their names together.

3. Evolution

Evolution

Eleven Jane Hopper had never been allowed to develop her own sense of style. She spent twelve years of her life wearing hospital gowns, tank tops and shorts. When she escaped she wore hand me downs from the Wheelers and later clothes Hopper would buy from Goodwill. Nancy had picked out her Snowball dress, Joyce had bought her clothes for school, and Hopper, well he insisted that she looked best in overalls and a flannel. So when Max had asked if she wanted to go shopping El had no clue how confused she would feel.

The mall was decent at least thirty stores on two levels with a rather wide selection. They had been in a fews stores already not finding anything they wanted. They were milling about inside some trendy store with music that was bordering on too loud when El finally asked Max "What are you supposed to buy here?" Max just blinked at her friend.

"Clothes. It's some dumb belief that you're supposed to get new clothes when you start a new year." El nodded.

"I don't know where Joyce bought my clothes last year. " said the quiet girl.

"Well thats okay, just pick out clothes you like from these stores. We can ask Joyce about anything we don't find here." Responded Max looking at El as she seemed to think of another question.

"Max, how do I know what I like?" She asked, eyes earnest.

Oh. Now Max understood. "Uhm... well I guess it depends on what you like more, jeans, skirts, dresses, long sleeves, short sleeves...." Max trailed off, she had no idea how to explain personal aesthetics to a very sheltered sixteen year old. "How about we start simple, whats your favorite color ?"

El thought moment. "Pink...or blue. Can't choose."

"Well that's a start, El. Let's pick a store and look through all the pink and blue clothes they have in your size. Then we can pick a handful for you to try." Said Max brightly, pleased for having come up with a plan.

El smiled and they walked to a different store that seemed to house a variety of styles. They had fun looking around the shop for a bit until Max noticed a trend in the clothes El was picking. The girl kept picking up very sweet and feminine looking tops but also seemed drawn to long blazers and boots. So Max began to assemble some outfits. El loved everything that Max was showing her and in the end, Max decided that El had a very distinct style. It was perfect for her. Feminine and sweet with a noticeable edge. El was so happy when she had all the bags with her new clothes that she had almost forgotten that Max still needed clothes.

"Max, what are you going to buy?"

The red headed girl stopped her trek to the food court and realized that she had forgotten to buy herself anything so far. She shrugged. "I'll find something, I'm easy that way."

El shook her head.

"Max, you helped me, so I'll help you. Food can wait." El grabbed her friend's hand and dragged her back into a different store. Max knew better than to argue with the blonde when she had that determined look in her eye so she ignored her growling stomach and resigned herself.

El may not have known what to dress herself in but she knew exactly what Max liked and so it was a quick trip into two shops. Max left pleased with the choices her friend made. All they were missing was a dress. In the end they decided to buy matching dresses. It was a tight black mid thigh dress with bold white stripes that went around the midriff and it came with black sheer tights. They had lunch and wandered around until the designated time when Nancy and Johnathan arrived to pick them up.

"Did you girls find everything you wanted?" Asked Nancy as she watched Johnathan place the numerous bags in the trunk.

"Yes! Max helped me pick out my own clothes, and I helped her pick out hers and we got matching dresses and we are going to look so bitchin' Nancy!" El seemed to burst with excitement at the prospect. The older girl laugh indulgently and Max smiled along side El.

"Our little runaway has pretty a pretty sick fashion sense when left to her own devices." Added Max

" Yeah well we always knew she was a badass." Said Johnathan once he got into the car. "I saw some of the stuff you got Ellie. Looks like Hop is going to have a heart attack."

El looked a little scared until everyone else chuckled and she realized they were joking. The drive back to Hawkins was lively and they arrived at the Hopper-Byers home where El and Max did a little modeling for the family. Everyone was a bit stunned by their choices but overall agreed that it was definitely cool.

"So i'll come over early on Monday to do your make up before we go to school. Boy, I cant wait to see the dumb looks on the guys face when they see us!" Max called to El as she grabbed her things and headed for the door.

The rest of the weekend passed in a blur and finally Monday morning rolled around bringing a very excited Max to wake up El an hour before they had to leave for school.

"Go away you psychotic woman" grumbled El from under her covers. Max laughed jovially.

" Tsk tsk. Now Eleven, is that anyway to treat your best friend who not only brings gifts of makeup but also a very large and very hot cup of coffee?" She inquired of the mass of blankets.

El poked her disheveled head out of her bed and looked towards the annoyingly chipper redhead to see that she did in fact come bearing gifts. El was always at the mercy of kind people with breakfast and as such she begrudgingly arose. Max was already dressed in a dark flannel with a Motley Crue tee peeking through and dark denim shorts on top of her sheer black tights, it was finished off with some well loved combat boots, black eyeliner and a bright red lip. She had

her long red hair pulled up in a high messy ponytail. Overall, El thought she looked like a total bad ass.

"Max its too early for you to look this good. Go away before you crush my self esteem." Said El as she began to gather her clothes for the day. Max snorted while trying to stifle a laugh.

"Well if you would get a move on we could both look hot together instead of me looking great and you looking like a sack of potatoes." El telekinetically threw a pillow at her friend.

Max just laughed and said " Alright, sheesh Hopper, i'll go get you some eggos while you shower. I hope Wheeler sleeps in because you are sure as hell not a morning person."

El emerged a short while later wearing a plain white tee that was tucked into a black leather mini skirt. She also had on her favorite black blazer with the sleeves rolled up and white chucks. Max had even packed lunch for them and Will while she waited. The two girls ate in companionable silence while they listened to Will putter about in his room getting ready. They washed their dishes and Max dragged El back into the bed room to do her hair and make up.

"Don't poke my eye out Mayfield!"

"Jesus El stop fidgeting or I'm going to do it on purpose!"

Only a few swears later and Max had successfully applied a nude smokey eye, a thin cat eye, and pale pink lipgloss. They had decided to pull half of El's hair back and away from her face with some barrettes. They finished getting ready just in time to catch a ride with Mrs. Byers and Will.

"Lucas and Mike are two lucky guys" exclaimed Joyce when she saw them. Max gleamed with pride while El smiled and tried to hide her blush.

" You guys look great but can we not start in on the dating dynamics yet? I've been up for thirty minutes mom" Added Will. Joyce obliged and wished her kids and Max good luck once they arrived at the school. The three of them wandered off to find the guys while joking

about how Max was the only person to wake El up early and survive. They were so caught up that they didn't notice how many stares they were getting or how their peers were moving aside to let them pass.

"Hey, Will, over here!" The three turned and noticed Dustin flagging them down by his locker. As they got closer they noticed that Mike and Lucas were standing next to him looking at their girlfriends in shock.

Will rolled his eyes and punched Mike in the arm. "Stop ogling my sister man. And Lucas, you've seen Max naked, stop making that face." The two boys in question blushed while the rest of their friends laughed.

El gravitated to Mikes side where she leaned in for a kiss.

"Pretty?" She asked leaning against him

"Beautiful. And sexy. And hot. And stunning and god I just wanna ..." he replied before pulling her into a passionate kiss.

Dustin and Will groaned while Lucas attempted to keep his own girlfriend from reprimanding El. " hands off Wheeler I did not spend all morning getting her ready so that you could muss up her hair and makeup in 10 seconds?!"

Eventually the two pulled apart and Mike began to notice that others in the hallway were looking at them. Some of the jocks were looking at Mike and Lucas with a degree of respect that had never before been aimed at them. Other guys looked toward El and Max hungrily and while some girls looked envious, or annoyed others yet look scared. El was oblivious to this as she was simply leaning into Mike and enjoying the moment but the rest of the Party seemed to have noticed as well.

" I guess we better shape up guys" said Dustin gesturing toward the guys preppy albeit plain clothes." The girls have opened the gates to moderate popularity as sophomores. Lets try not to fuck it up." It may have been a joke but by the end of the month all four of the guys had, on one occasion or another, called the girls over to help them figure out their own sense of style. The two girls had ended up being

a rather formidable force in the propulsion of social standing for the gang.

4. The Scandal

A/N: First off, thank you to everyone who has reviewed, favorited, and followed this story. I appreciate each and every one of you. Second, this chapter is more Mileven centric as it is essentially part one of a two part narrative. Lastly, I spent the past few weeks subbing at a high school and they swear a lot so there is quite a bit of cursing in this one. Enjoy.

The Scandal

Anyone who has ever attended a public high school knows one thing for certain, the entirety of the student hierarchy runs on gossip. Gossip is what gives some students power while others get pushed to the side. It spreads quickly and can make or break the high school experience in a matter of days. The queen bee of first semester could get caught with a geeky novel in her bag and quickly find herself dethroned before midterms. The lowliest of nerds shows up to school one day sporting a shiner and a good story and suddenly he finds himself in a higher echelon. The gossip mill is the envy and enemy of all who walked the schools halls.

For the small party of friends it was no different. Mike and Lucas had been elevated from bottom of the barrel nerds to slightly above average nerds when their girlfriends managed to catch the eyes of numerous jocks. The girls paid them no mind but if their friends were no longer being bullied then they would withstand the at times gross attention they received. The tenuous status the party had achieved meant that for a time, they had avoided being topics of conversation. However when the fate of their social standing rested on two girls with fiery tempers, it could all very well come crashing down.

The gossip mill started up on Monday.

"Did you hear Troy got sent to military school?"

"Really? I heard he was in juvie for assault"

"My dad said the guy just ran away, he couldn't stand his family anymore."

By Tuesday the Mill had a new target

"James really is a weak guy."

"Yeah losing his only friend is kinda sad."

"I guess we right to not take him seriously. The kid is a total loser."

On Wednesday, there was a lull but on Thursday it was moving so fast it could have powered all of Hawkins for a week.

"I heard James tried to push himself on Mayfield after her gym class."

"Yeah and Elle Hopper found him and kicked his ass for touching her friend."

"Thats not what I heard, I heard that Mayfield and James had been hooking up for a while now and Hopper was mad because she had been hooking up with James too! It was a crime of passion!"

"WHAT?"

"That can't be true those girls are almost obsessively devoted to their boyfriends"

"It doesn't add up though, James might be be spineless but he's a pretty big guy. Those two girls would be hard pressed to one up him in a fight unless he didn't fight back"

"Ohh, guys! He wouldn't have fought back if he was two timing them!"

"I guess..."

"It must be true then!"

By Friday the mill had done its job. The entirety of the school was under the impression that Max and El had cheated on their boyfriends with James. It may not have been true but that did not stop the rumors.

Max leaned against her locker after gym and scowled at all the girls

in her row who kept shooting her dirty looks. El was sporting some rather deep scratch marks across her arms and midsection after a particularly nasty game of flag football.

"They never gave a shit about how sweet and nice the boys were before but now every one thinks we're as heartless as cadavers."

El just nodded silently as she changed. Mike hadn't spoken to her all day. He had been home sick yesterday when the gossip got out. He claimed to believe in her but was showing no signs to back that up.

Max gathered her things and sat on the floor while she waited for El to finish.

"How's Michael?"

"Fine, I guess. I don't know. He's been avoiding me." She said finally getting all her things in order.

"What a fucker."

"Watch it mayfield, that my boyfriend your talking about!"

"Exactly Hopper, he should be defending your honor not moping about like there is any truth to the lies."

The two girls were walking to their lunch period, attempting to ignore the looks they were getting as well as all the taunts from guys about being easy.

"You're one to talk, hows Lucas handling it again?"

"Hey, so what if we got into a screaming match last night? This morning he and Dustin got in-school suspension for beating James black and blue."

"Really?!" Inquired El, Max nodded.

"Yep, even soft spoken Will, has straight up torn into anyone one who has said anything about us within his earshot. Face it Ellie, the only one not backing us is your fucker of a boyfriend."

The brunette shoved her friend sideways into a wall as the redhead just laughed.

They walked into the cafeteria very well aware that they were currently the topic of everyone's lunchtime conversations. It was awkward but they held their heads high and tried to find where their friends were. Max spotted Will first, standing with his lunch tray by the back doors waving at them.

"I figured we could eat in the quad today" said Will when they reached him, the two girls were grateful and followed him outside. It was cold but at least they weren't being watched. El looked around for Mike but couldn't find him.

"He said he still wasn't feeling well, El. He went to lay down in the Nurses office."

El sent a sad smile of thanks to her brother and the three enjoyed a relatively nice lunch hour that ended in Max agreeing to come over to the Hopper-Byers home after school so they could all relax after the nightmarish day. The rest of their classes came and went until finally all six party members met up at the bike racks after school.

Max ran to hug Lucas when she saw him, showing more PDA than the couple usually did. Will jokingly copied Max and ran to hug Dustin who laughed when Will pretended to sob after 'being apart for so long!'

El casually walked to Mike who looked quite healthy but who for some reason wouldn't look her in the eye. She grabbed his hand.

"Mike?"

"mmh?" he motioned, still not looking directly at her

"What's wrong? Please look at me." She begged.

Mike looked up and held her gaze, she gasped softly and dropped his hand. His eyes showed nothing but betrayal and fury. She had seen it before, when he thought she was tricking him the day they found Not-Wills body in the quarry.

"You don't believe me." She muttered, feeling as though he had punched her in the gut.

"I never said that El."

"You don't have to Michael. I know you well enough to know that you think all the shit they are saying about Max and I is true. I can see it written on your face. Is that why you didn't have lunch with us?!" Her voice was getting louder. She knew her friends were watching the exchange but she just couldn't bring herself to care.

"I'm not going to talk to you if this is how you're going to behave, *Jane*" He said glaring and taking a step away from her.

"Oh real, fucking mature Mike! Whatever, it's obvious to me now, that you don't trust me. Max was right, you are a real fucker." She bit back at him.

His eyes flashed and he grabbed his bike, "Come find me when you aren't acting like a bitch." He remarked and began to pedal away.

All the rest of the party was just standing there in shock. They had never seen Mike and El fight like that before. It was expected of Max and Lucas but never Mike and El. Max snapped out of her trance first and rushed to her girl friends side. Muttering consoling nothings in an effort to stop the tears rolling down the brunettes face. Will, Lucas, and Dustin also tried to console El before she was calm enough to bike herself home with Max tagging along. The three remaining boys decided to head to the Wheeler house.

It was Holly who opened the door when they arrived. She smiled at her brothers friends and pointed towards his bedroom. The three trekked upstairs waving a quick hello to Mrs. Wheeler who was on the phone in the kitchen. They had come up with a plan on the ride over but as soon as Mike opened his door, all Will saw was red. He lunged at mike and started punching every part of his best friend. Dustin and Lucas shouted and rushed to separate the two. They were all panting and standing in a tense silence.

"Fuck you Mike, you promised you would never hurt her!" Shouted Will from Dustins tight grip

"I didn't hurt her, she hurt me Will, she was screwing around with James, of all the fucking people it was James!" Responded Mike, looking closer to tears than he had looked all day.

Lucas had to chime in, releasing his hold on Mike and shoving him towards the bed,"Jesus Christ Mike, you're a real fucking idiot you know that, its all bullshit! Eleven loves you more than she loves her freedom. She isn't going to cheat on you ever and certainly not with James!"

"Man, the girls didn't do anything wrong. James was harassing Max after gym class. El and I went looking for her at lunch on Wednesday when she didn't show up. El used her powers to pull him off her and I went to find a teacher. When I got back Max had beaten James with her skateboard and was crying to El." Recounted Dustin

"James got detention and Max was sent to the counselor. I had the same talk with these guys yesterday night but we didn't call you because you were sick and needed to rest." He finished.

"Yeah and then you spent the whole day today acting like a little bitch so no-one saw you long enough to let you know." Added Lucas

Mike looked at his friends from his place on his bed. Will was still glaring for making his sister cry. Lucas looked disgusted and Dustin just looked disappointed in him. Mike hung his head in shame. El had never given him a reason to distrust her and yet his own insecurities had caused him to lash out at her when she needed him.

"I messed everything up didn't I?" Asked Mike, all the fight visibly draining out of him

"Yeah man, not only did you make your girlfriend— who is way out of you league by the way— Cry, but you managed to piss off Max and our docile little Will over here, wants to kill you. Oh and you ignored her all day when every girl in our grade was bullying her and every guy was calling her a slut. So good job on being a dick today. You really nailed it." Responded Dustin. Lucas just nodded in agreement and Will crossed him arms as Dustin finally let go of him.

" I shouldn't have said such nasty things to her, I'm sorry Will."

"Don't apologize to me Mike. You better find someway to fix this because you can be your ass I'm not covering for you with Hopper if she's still crying when he gets home. I'll even come and watch when he hangs you up by your toes. Best friends or not."

Mike winced at Will's harsh words.

"I deserved that... and the bruises I'm sure to have on my torso tomorrow from your greeting earlier."

Will flushed a little. " Yeah, well, if you weren't so damn tall I would have hit your face like I wanted too."

Dustin laughed and soon all of the boys were in stitches all the emotions of the afternoon having taken their toll. When they finally managed to slow their giggle fit, reality sunk in for Mike once more. He had seriously hurt the love of his life. And to make matters worse, she had just spent the last hour with Max Mayfield the one person in their party who had no qualms about breaking up with someone. (This was Lucas and her's 8th attempt to make their relationship work.) Mike had no doubt that El's mind was currently being filled with numerous reasons to break up with him. How was he ever going to make things right?

5. The Resolution

The Resolution

"What if we trick her into a room with Mike and then tell her she can't leave until they reconcile?"

"Lucas, why do your plans always involve locking people in rooms?"

"It worked with Max and El didn't it?"

"Yeah, but Lucas, that only worked so well because Steve was there. He's still away at school right now."

Will and Mike were sitting on the couch in the basement absentmindedly listening to Dustin and Lucas figure out ways to help Mike with his girl problems. Will was still pissed about the whole thing but he would take the guys dumb bickering over watching El cry any day so he was hiding out until dinner when he knew she would stop either so Hopper wouldn't know . Mike on the other hand was lost in his own thoughts. He knew he had been a jerk to El and it was completely unwarranted. Sure his brain was still groggy and addled by his recent cold but he should have trusted her anyway. Hell, if he was being completely honest with himself he knew all along that the rumors were just a bunch of bullshit. He had let his fear of abandonment get the best of him and now he had to face the fact that she may be too upset to forgive him.

"Mike, Lucas said something that wasn't crap!" Called Dustin breaking his introspection.

"Hey!"

" I said it *wasn't* crap Lucas! Take the compliment."

"Whats up guys?" Asked Mike.

"Lucas tell him!" shouted Dustin

"I would if you shut up Dustin. Anyway, what if we called Max?"

Will and Mike looked at Lucas with blank stares.

"So she can yell at me for being such an idiot? I don't know how that's going to make El feel better."

"No man, think about it. Who does El listen to basically without question?"

"Steve?" Inquired Mike.

"No! Well yeah but not who I'm thinking of"

"Mike?" Posed Will.

"Also true but not right now, obviously. God you guys are worthless. MAX! Dude, she listens to max"

Realization struck the remaining boys. "So you want me to call Max and see if I can't get her to convince El that I'm an idiot and I'm sorry."

"Exactly! Of course you're going to have to withstand her yelling at you for a little bit but after that you can plead your case and it will hopefully resolve itself."

The boys all watched Mike carefully as he processed the idea. A small smile grew upon his face and he nodded, "Yeah, that could work." He said and jumped into planning with the boys.

Across town, the girls were laying together on the floor, crowns of their heads touching. They were mostly ruminating in silence as El had worn herself out by ranting during the entire bike ride home. Max had remained suspiciously quite that afternoon something which El had apparently noticed.

"What gives Mayfield? You haven't told me to break up with him or threatened to beat him up or even called him a bad name since we got home."

Max shifted a little " Its nothing really, just dumb thoughts."

"Max." Said El, moving to sit upright, " Friends don't lie."

Max gave an exaggerated groan and sat up to face Eleven, " I really hate Wheeler for teaching you that."

El smiled and motioned for Max to go on.

"Well, I've just been thinking... Mike can be a real asshole when he's mad but from every interaction I've seen between the two of you, he usually gives you all the benefit of the doubt he can. I guess... I'm just wondering if maybe he wasn't trying to ignore you but instead trying to process?— I don't know Ellie, I'm just speculating." Finished Max shrugging her shoulders and scanning Eleven's face.

"...Overwhelmed? Is that the word?" Asked the blank faced Brunette.

"Yeah, or maybe I'm wrong all together. Just forget I said anything El." Responded Max moving to stand. El placed a hand on Max's arm to still her. "No. No, You're probably right. Why did he get so nasty though?"

Max shrugged. "He's a fucker El, what more can you expect?" Eleven began to giggle at the deadpan delivery of the statement and they both broke into peels of laughter at the absurdity of the whole afternoon. They were still laughing when the phone rang, Max composed herself first and ran to answer.

"HB residence, Mayfield speaking."

"Oh good Max, its you."

"Lucas?"

"Yep. Hey Mike and Will are on their way over"

"Will lives here but why Wheeler?

"He wants to talk to you without El knowing first"

"What? Why me?"

"Just let him plead his case Zoomer. Please."

" ...I'll give him 10 minutes of my time."

"Perfect. You're amazing. I love you."

"I know. Later Stalker."

Max hung up the phone and returned to El's room. They listened to music and talked about beating up James again and plans to get revenge on the mean girls. They were so involved that at first they didn't notice Will coming in to the room.

"Whats up guys?" He asked as he leaned against the door frame. El smiled and Max nodded at him. "So Ellie, want to pick out some movies to watch later? I'm sure Max has done enough to warrant a smoke break." Eleven stood and followed Will into the living room to search the VHS collection while Max picked up her jacket that held her smokes and wandered to the front porch. Mike was sitting on the steps waiting for her, bouncing his knee. Max sat down next to him and lit her cigarette.

"So, why did you want to talk to me and not your girlfriend ?"

"Max, I need you to help me. I know I really fucked up but El respects you, if you told her that I'm sorry and how much of an idiot I am maybe she would forgive me more readily. I'll take my lumps if you have anything to say to me because I really hurt her this time and I sort of deserve to be knocked around. Will did some damage already but I know you've been with her this whole time so you probably have stuff to say too. Just please help me, I can't lose her." He had blurted it all out and was staring at her expectantly but Max was silent.

"Mike, you're such a dummy." She said with a soft shake of her head. The boy in question said nothing.

Max took a long drag from her cigarette and faced him head on.

"Go in there and apologize in person. Or buy her breakfast tomorrow and do it then but Michael, you do not need my help. At least not anymore." The confusion was written plainly on his face so Max sighed and continued. "She isn't mad. Just concerned and yeah I may have talked her down a little but really she just thinks that you hung the fucking moon, so naturally she was hurt when it felt like you

didn't trust her to the same degree that she trusts you. I told her you were probably just processing everything and she was fine. You just can't leave her in the dark, she had twelve years of that in the lab, be straight with her." Max finished unsure if she made her point. Discussing emotional issues with anyone outside of Joyce or Eleven was difficult. Mike was contemplating his friend's words he nodded more to himself before speaking.

"Thank you Max. If you're being upfront with me, and I've never known you to be anything but, then I really owe you one. I'll apologize in a minute but, can I ask why you didn't just tear me to shreds in front of her? I know I'm not your favorite person in the party." Max had finished her smoke and snuffed it out.

"You're not my favorite Mike, that's true, but you are hers and if Eleven loves someone so much then they have to be worth a damn. Besides, I know what it's like to be afraid of losing someone so much that you fuck everything up." Max looked out into the woods speaking softly. "Lucas and I break up a lot but it's because we let our own insecurities push us apart. Still, we always find our way back. You and El will too." She faced the dark haired boy once more, "Besides, you two need to stay together and give the rest of us something to strive for." She said with a grin.

Mike was stunned by the gentle and genuine tone that Max had been using so he smiled, then stood up and offered her a hand. Max shook her head and lit another cigarette. "Go sweep her off her feet lover boy. I'll stay here for a little bit."

Mike gave her a fond look then braced himself as he walked in the home. The redhead smiled to herself. El and Mike would be fine by the time Joyce came home with dinner.

Max didn't know what the week would hold but with the friends she had she knew it would all work out and so as she finished her cigarette she felt comfortable heading back inside.

Tomorrow, Mike would bring flowers and coffee to the girls before they awoke.

On Monday he would get in school suspension for writing 'Asshole'

on James' locker with permanent marker.

By Wednesday all the rumors that started this mess would be forgotten, replaced by how James mysteriously started wetting himself throughout the day.

And by Thursday the rest of the party would notice that Mike and Max had developed a soft spot for each other's complaints. No one would say anything about it and life would go on, Party business as usual.